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Institute of Forensic Pathology Sought

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The man whose body was brought to the chief medical examiner's office was thought to have been killed by a U.S. park policeman during a shootout on the 14th Street Bridge. It turned out that he had shot himself.

An elderly woman pulled from the Anacostia River, thought to be the victim of an accidental drowning, was found by the medical examiner to have been murdered.

These and other cases in which incorrect presumptions of death were made by police or hospital personnel were cited by Dr. James L.

Luke, the District's chief medical examiner, to support his request for \$350,000 to establish an institute of forensic pathology here.

Such an agency, Luke said, "would allow us to explore the untapped possibilities of forensic science for determining the causes of death."

During the first three weeks of January, Luke said, 16 of 70 autopsies conducted by his office resulted in a change in the listed cause of death.

According to Luke, "The specific cause of death is incorrect in approximately 50 per cent of the total cases investigated by any func-

tional medical-legal agency when pre- and post-autopsy causes of death are compared."

Luke cited other cases in point:

- A middle-aged man found dead in his camper was thought at first to have died of alcoholism. An autopsy revealed that he died of acute carbon monoxide poisoning caused by a defective propane heating system.

- An alcoholic found dead in his bed at St. Elizabeths Hospital, presumably from natural causes, was found to have died from a massive depressed fracture of the skull—a homicide, the medical examiner's office said.

Luke presented his plan to the mayor's criminal justice coordinating board, the agency that receives and approves requests for such funding here.

After a proposal is approved the office of criminal justice plans and analysis dispenses the funds to the requesting agency. T. David Austern, newly appointed head of board, attended the coordinating board meeting at which Luke made his proposal.

The office of chief medical examiner was created last February, under the D.C. Crime Act, which required a trained forensic pathologist to head the office.

The medical examiner is responsible for determining cause of death and the circumstances surrounding it, but has nothing to do with any legal proceedings that might arise. The medical examiner's findings are available to both sides in any court case.

Luke said the study of forensic science is vital to lawyers and private physicians "to enable them (lawyers) to utilize our findings in court" and to help "private physicians determine which cases are reportable."

However, he said, few law schools offer instruction in forensic pathology, and the requirements for American Board of Pathology certification are "far less rigorous than are those in most other fields of medical specialization," causing it to be "considered as the last refuge of medical mediocrity."

The proposed institute would provide for the hiring of 12 forensic scientists and lawyers and would eventually provide new facilities for the office of the chief medical examiner.

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Luke said his proposal is the only one of its kind in the country and is relatively inexpensive considering the service it would provide. The institute would also engage in research in the field of forensic science.

The institute would operate of the medical examiner's office, "though the staff would not necessarily be controlled by us. There would probably be a board that would administer the institute," Luke said.

Luke, who said he has support for his proposal from Mayor Walter E. Washington, Joseph P. Yeldell, head of the department of human resources, the criminal justice coordinating board and the police department, said he expects to implement his plans within the next year.

The office of chief medical examiner is administered by the human resources department.

"We have been more concerned with apprehending and rehabilitating the suspect and assailant than in learning from the victim . . . when, where and how did he die, what really happened to him in terms of sequence of injury," Luke said.

Luke said the institute

would allow the medical examiner to be more effective in determining causes of death because it would have access to research techniques, and the ability to apply the techniques and finding of other disciplines.

The office of chief medical examiner has an annual budget of about \$360,000, remaining at the same level of funding since its creation. According to Luke, the supplies and equipment portion of the budget is already depleted with six months remaining in this fiscal year.

Despite what he calls "grossly inadequate facilities," peeling paint "falling onto our dimly lit autopsy tables" and violations of health codes, Luke says he is optimistic.

"This is a winner. With the support and interest that has been expressed, I have every belief that we will get new staff, facilities and the institute."